

LIBRARY ISSUES

BRIEFINGS FOR FACULTY AND ADMINISTRATORS

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Fostering Information Literacy Through Faculty Development

by Barbara Fister

A few years ago when librarians at Gustavus Adolphus College conducted surveys as part of an external review of their programs, they asked faculty whether they felt that students had a good grasp of how to find and use information independently by the time they graduate. By and large, faculty weren't confident they did. Several of the them, however, took the time to add a handwritten addendum to the Likert scale: *it's not your fault; that's our job.*

Helping students learn to find, assess, and use information critically is something academic librarians have taken to heart. The set of skills involved – collected under the awkward name “information literacy” – has been the focus of a significant percentage of professional publications and presentations. Information literacy is also the subject of at least three annual conferences, a post-graduate study program, and a long-running discussion list of over 4,700 members. Librarians are serious about information literacy because learning is what libraries are for.

But while information literacy is important to librarians, it doesn't belong exclusively to them. The Middle States Commission on Higher Education has included information literacy in its accreditation expectations for many years. Information literacy, according to the Association of American Colleges and Universities (AAC&U), is one of a core set of “essential learning outcomes” for the 21st century. One benchmark for when a higher education initiative graduates from a fad to a significant trend is when standardized tests are marketed to measure it; Educational Testing Service launched their iSkills instrument in 2005. In short, though information literacy is championed by librarians, it is widely embraced.

Developing students' information literacy skills is a complex shared endeavor that takes

time and repeated opportunities for learning. In a 2007 survey, the AAC&U found that 70 percent of employers believe colleges and universities should place more emphasis on information literacy, along with closely related skills such as critical thinking, analytical reasoning, and effective communication. Clearly, nobody expects that librarians will fill that gap – except, perhaps, librarians themselves.

Librarians acknowledge that collaboration with faculty is needed for successful information literacy programs, but that collaboration tends to be based on individual relationships developed between a librarian and a faculty member or with directors of a required first-year course. Rarely do these collaborations address the full range of information literacy skills in a holistic manner. It is unusual for a department as a whole to determine what information literacy means for their discipline and where those skills will be learned. And it's even more rare for an undergraduate curriculum to articulate it as an agreed-upon cross-curricular goal, championed by the entire faculty.

That said, it would be difficult to find any faculty member who would say, when asked whether they want their students to learn how to find, assess, and use information, “no; we don't do that in my discipline.” Maybe these essential outcomes are not articulated as campus-wide values because they are so intrinsic to teaching, as basic as helping students learn to think critically and communicate clearly. Librarians try to promote information literacy however they can, but to engage students in the

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full range of information literacy skills requires more than a commitment from librarians and makeshift collaborations among well-meaning individuals.

Instead of focusing their efforts on teaching students, librarians could focus more of their efforts on faculty – not just arranging a library session next Wednesday, but in providing opportunities to delve deeper into the complexities of making wise choices among abundant evidence, of formulating creative questions, of making sense of sources and using them to build something new. After all, it is the faculty in the disciplines – not librarians assisting with a course – who spend the most time with students and who do the heavy lifting when it comes to learning how to choose the best sources for an academic task, how to understand the content of those sources and the disciplinary contexts in which they were created, and how to put them to use.

Faculty Development Meets Information Literacy

There are two approaches libraries can take to creating a healthy faculty development program for information literacy: build it yourself, or become a resource for an existing faculty development program.

Many libraries build their own, drawing faculty into the information literacy fold by providing a range of programs, from hosting brown bag lunch discussions to finding resources for course development grants or summer workshops for faculty. Others partner with a centralized faculty development program – an excellent option when a well-established program can help with publicity and buy-in as well as funding for incentives. The library can provide expertise and ongoing support of those faculty who participate, but it's very clearly owned by the faculty and braided into other institutional priorities.

Most campuses have some sort of faculty development program, formal or informal. It may be based in a center with an emphasis on teaching and learning. It may be staffed by administrators with expertise in instructional design. Or it may be a faculty-driven center that supports both teaching

and scholarship through a menu of programs. In many situations, a faculty development program provides a gathering place for faculty involved in a variety of programs and initiatives and provides bridges between individual faculty and a variety of campus programs and initiatives. The kinds of programs supported by faculty development programs include

- Summer workshops on teaching and learning
- Stipends or grants for course development or scholarly projects
- Brown bag lunches offering opportunities for faculty to share ideas
- Departmental grants to support initiatives tied to campus-wide goals
- Orientation programs for teaching assistants and/or new faculty members
- Support for research in the scholarship of teaching and learning
- Technology training and grants
- Support for general education programs such as writing across the curriculum or freshman seminars
- Programs for student/faculty research collaborations
- Assistance with classroom assessment techniques and student learning outcomes

All of these activities offer opportunities for librarians to work with faculty on the common cause of information literacy.

Whatever administrative form these programs take, successful ones reflect institutional cultures and values. If there is no established and successful program to work with and the library creates its own program, it's essential to cultivate a cadre of faculty from different disciplines and ranks as cultural informants who can help the library plan programs that address faculty concerns, preferences, and learning styles.

Faculty Development Programs in Action

In 1999, the same year that Gustavus Adolphus College began working on a planning grant to start a comprehensive faculty development program, the library was awarded a research and demonstration grant by

the Institute of Museum and Library Services to develop a model program to enhance research skills across the curriculum. Building on a firm foundation of course-related instruction and informed by focus groups with faculty, the librarians developed and hosted two week-long faculty workshops and two institutes for librarians at regional colleges focused on working with faculty and assessing student learning. Planning for this grant started by spelling out five assumptions.

- *Research is a valuable experience for undergraduates.* Research, even at a rudimentary level, demands critical thinking, reading, composing, and the formation of independent judgment. Research experiences – whether simple problem-solving tasks or more complex data-gathering and analysis – give students a deeper understanding of how knowledge is formed and how conflicting ideas can be negotiated. The researcher, in effect, becomes a collaborative participant in the construction of knowledge, not merely a consumer of information.
- *Research as an activity is situated within disciplinary frameworks,* and so needs to be addressed in terms of specific research traditions.
- *The research process is complex and recursive* and involves not just finding information but framing and refining an appropriate question, choosing and evaluating appropriate evidence, negotiating different viewpoints, interpreting material, and composing some kind of response. We need to bear in mind as we teach that research is a non-linear discovery process, not a set of discrete techniques.
- *Research skills, like writing skills, are developed over time.* They can't be mastered in a single library session or course, but must be built upon and practiced, both throughout the entire process of a research project and through a student's education.
- *The higher level skills employed in research are essentially the same whether you are using print or electronic resources.* At the time the grant was written, mastering new technology seemed to be the greatest

challenge librarians faced. Yet a faculty member in a focus group said “It’s not about technology. It’s about pedagogy.” The most important thing the library could do, in his estimation, was to give faculty the space and time to talk about how to help students learn in this new hybrid print/electronic information landscape.

Since then, Gustavus has developed an exemplary faculty development program, but the 31 faculty from all divisions of the college who participated in the IMLS-funded project still talk about how useful it was; traces of the workshop continue to be seen in assignments and courses. A more recent faculty development summer

workshop – organized and funded by the faculty development program with some library assistance – was on “The Student as Scholar: Enhancing Research and Creative Practice” and invited faculty from every department on campus to consider what we do to embed research and creativity into students’ lives both within and beyond the classroom. In many ways, the seeds planted by librarians ten years ago has become part of a renewable learning ecosystem.

In January 2009 Gustavus librarians offered a short three-day workshop for faculty on “how information works” – adapted from a senior-level interdisciplinary seminar taught by the library each spring. Faculty hearing

about it from their students asked if a condensed version might be available for them. By partnering with the faculty development program, a program with faculty incentives was put together at no cost to the library. Faculty participants, ranging from the sciences to the humanities, enjoyed having opportunities to discuss the changing nature of information and how they might engage students in a deeper understanding of its dynamics. Though not every faculty member at Gustavus has been involved in information literacy-focused faculty development, every department has been involved in one or more workshops that provided them with financial incentives and ongoing support.

Examples of Faculty Development/Information Literacy Initiatives

Earlham College, Richmond IN

Earlham has the distinction of having an entire information literacy approach named after its innovative work on integrating library instruction into the curriculum long before it was common practice. Many libraries continue to describe their programs as ones that follow “the Earlham model.” In addition to working closely one-on-one with faculty and offering occasional summer workshops, Information Services staff (including librarians and instructional technologists) host a regular lunchtime gathering at which new technologies with pedagogical applications are explored – with pizza on the side.

Siena College, Loudenville NY

Since 2002, the library has offered Information Literacy Curriculum Development Grants to faculty who partner with a librarian to develop curricular innovations that will enhance information literacy. The grants were initiated in part to address the criteria of Middle States Commission accreditation that emphasize the importance of information literacy across the curriculum. Catherine Crohan, coordinator of library instruction reports “We consider the grants to be the most successful effort to incorporating information literacy throughout the curriculum.”

James Madison University, Harrisonburg, VA

For the past four years, the library at James Madison has hosted summer workshops for faculty focused on designing assignments that foster development of information literacy. Faculty apply to team up with a librarian to develop information literacy components for courses and receive a generous stipend. Workshops have focused on both general education courses and on courses in the majors.

According to Lynn Cameron, Coordinator of Library Instruction, “we think it is the single most effective thing we can do to promote information literacy. Some of the faculty who attended our workshops have gone on to publish or present their results, sometimes in collaboration with their liaison librarian. It’s been a good investment, one that keeps giving as faculty members share what they are doing in faculty development workshops and in departmental meetings.”

Trinity University, San Antonio, TX

An ambitious and comprehensive plan to embed information literacy into the curriculum has been developed at Trinity, expanding the responsibility not just beyond the library to the faculty in the disciplines, but also to co-curricular efforts. The five-year plan includes summer workshops that bring faculty together “to educate themselves in new technologies that enhance teaching, to design assignments that address the changing landscape of information, and to familiarize themselves with information literacy goals.” Individual faculty and staff will be eligible for course development and programming grants related to information literacy. The plan also calls for hiring additional instructional technologists and teaching space renovations.

Though clearly librarians at Trinity have provided significant leadership in this effort, this focus for campus-wide innovation was arrived at through a process involving the entire community in examining possible strategic initiatives. From an initial dozen proposals, an inclusive process winnowed them down to ten, then six, then three before choosing information literacy as the proposal “most promising for significantly enriching student learning at Trinity University.”

Working Knowledge

Though time and funding are perhaps the most commonly-cited challenges for offering faculty development initiatives to enhance information literacy, cultural barriers can also prove daunting. Librarians are far more invested in collaborating with faculty in the disciplines than faculty are in working with librarians. In some cases, librarians may suffer from a lack of social standing; in others, faculty may feel so besieged by information that they're reluctant to display their ignorance publicly. Finally, information literacy may seem like one more good cause competing for attention and resources among other good causes – civic engagement, global citizenship, service learning and so on.

Yet being able to find, judge, and use information is a fundamental intellectual skill that all of our students need, and the responsibility for improving their abilities is not one librarians shoulder alone; it's a job for the entire campus, and offers benefits to all faculty. The library itself is uniquely well-positioned to serve as the symbolic common ground for the disciplines, since it belongs to all of them, yet is not owned exclusively to any of them.

It's important to bear in mind faculty preferences when developing opportunities. When the first IMLS-funded workshop for faculty was developed at Gustavus nearly ten years ago, it was shaped by these principles.

- The faculty believe student inquiry is essential to our mission and take full ownership of it as a pedagogical challenge. It isn't something they expect someone else to teach. Librarians and faculty are all in it together.

- The faculty have a great deal of collective wisdom as teachers, but very little time to share it with one another.
- Timing is important. Faculty need to be free to focus. Scheduling a workshop at the beginning of summer worked well for most departments, but trial and error uncovered the fact that workshops should not be scheduled during the same week that science faculty were setting up their labs and training student researchers.
- Faculty culture honors expertise, but is also intensely curious about how students learn and what might be getting in the way. Gustavus faculty – from newly-minted assistant professors to seasoned senior faculty – proved willing to share both their frustrations and their successes.
- Even faculty who value the lecture as a means of imparting information prefer active learning. During the workshops faculty learned from one another and from the librarians rather than having librarians lead the workshop.
- Offering a stipend and requiring a formal application, including a signed agreement to provide information and course materials for further research, was a signal to faculty that their participation was valued and significant.
- Faculty want to engage ideas in the abstract, but also want tangible results; each applicant was expected to use the week to design or redesign a course and share the results. In practice, some of the faculty redesigned several courses in the weeks following the workshop.
- One of the great rewards of an interdisciplinary workshop is the opportunity to see connections among disparate fields and

to meet faculty outside one's own department. Again and again, this benefit was cited by faculty who participated.

The library may take the initiative to create the space in the calendar, provide incentives in the form of stipends, and organize the event, but in the end information literacy isn't a library effort. Faculty development opportunities offer a chance for faculty to focus on what they want to accomplish, to learn from their colleagues, and to share what they know with their peers.

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Resources

ACRL Information Literacy Competency Standards for Higher Education <http://www.ala.org/ala/mgrps/divs/acrl/standards/informationliteracycompetency.cfm>

Developing Research and Communication Skills: Guidelines for Information Literacy in the Curriculum (Middle States Commission) <http://www.msche.org/publications/Developing-Skills080111151714.pdf>

Expanding Horizons: Using Information in the 21st Century (Trinity University) http://www.trinity.edu/departments/academic_affairs/qep/expanding_horizons_qep.pdf

Faculty Development Grants (Siena College) http://www.siena.edu/level2col.aspx?menu_id=530&id=1806

How Information Works (Gustavus Adolphus College) <http://howinformationworks.wordpress.com/>

Information Literacy in the Major (James Madison University) <http://www.lib.jmu.edu/ilworkshop08/default.aspx>

Liberal Education and America's Promise (AAC&U) <http://www.aacu.org/leap/vision.cfm>

POD Network: Professional and Organizational Network in Higher Education <http://www.podnetwork.org/>



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